



## SPANISH CLASSES ARE THE PERFECT PLACE TO HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP CULTURAL COMPETENCE.

BY LIZ RANSOM

**AT THE BEGINNING** of each school year, Spanish teacher Aurora Hermo displays pictures of a diverse group of people and asks her students to identify which of them are Latino. They confidently eliminate those wearing business attire. Then they narrow the group down further by eliminating those with the lightest and darkest complexions.

In reality, all of the images are of Latino men and women.

Hermo, who teaches at Summit Senior High School in Summit, N.J., says the results of this exercise are the same even among students who speak Spanish as a part of their heritage. In fact, she finds that her students' perceptions instead reflect the narrow portrayal of Latinos in popular culture.

The National Association of Hispanic Journalists tracks the presence of Latinos in the news. It reports that news stories in which Latinos are the subject most often concern immigration, poverty and crime.

And Hollywood does no better in reflecting the broad reality of Latino life. Latino characters are often portrayed as poor and uneducated. In his

book *Hollywood Hispano: The Latinos in Motion Pictures*, George Hadley-Garcia writes, "Hollywood has not explored the world of Hispanics who are rich, educated, middle-class, who are gay or bisexual"—in other words, the depth and breadth of any culture. What students see often reinforces stereotypes and creates a skewed vision of the actual communities in which they live.

The good news is that Spanish-language teachers are perfectly positioned to tackle anti-bias issues within their curriculum. But it doesn't happen automatically. Educators must be purposeful in integrating language and culture, with a goal of eliminating biases as their students accumulate language skills.

### Embracing Standards-Based Instruction

Pablo Muirhead now teaches Spanish at Milwaukee Area Technical College. But it was teaching a middle school class that helped him reimagine the goals of foreign-language instruction. He created a unit about an indigenous Peruvian family that moves to the city. His eighth-graders learned what the

class needed to cover—such as vocabulary—from the text. But they also were able to explore the themes of cultural merging, discrimination and linguistic difference.

Muirhead's approach reflects the national standards for foreign-language learning issued by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The standards identify five interlinked goal areas: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons and communities. And they provide a framework for teachers to implement curriculum that explores both dominant and marginalized cultural perspectives while helping students acquire language skills. But Muirhead laments the "real, or perceived, pressure" teachers feel to get through certain chapters in a textbook, which often results in cultural themes being relegated to an afterthought, at best.

In contrast, Muirhead found that creating a more realistic unit that encompassed all of the standards engaged his students on an emotional level, making anti-bias goals easier to achieve.



## Creating Curriculum That Reflects Diversity

Hermo knows that students tend to accept the perspective of the dominant culture as reality, so she feels it's important that they develop critical cultural competence. She challenges her students in lively debates, and recalls one in which her advanced-Spanish students tackled the role of women in society. They were surprised to learn that women now serve, or have recently served, as the presidents of nations such as Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Costa Rica.

"Many kids are used to seeing themselves 'on top,'" Hermo says, but she constantly urges them to explore their own assumptions and to be more aware of the reality of the world.

Speaking as a teacher myself, that means replacing dominant perspectives about culture with more complex views. For example, in a unit highlighting the African diaspora in Peru, I once challenged my students to create a skit about a family. Two boys snickered and asked, "Can we be a gay couple?"

As a relatively new teacher, I balked, imagining the stereotype-filled rendition we'd see if I said yes. At the time, I thought I could remain neutral by saying no to the boys, but I've since realized neutrality is not possible.

In 2004, the California Safe Schools

Coalition report *Safe Place to Learn* found that two out of three students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered reported being harassed. To help improve school climates, the report recommended introducing curriculum that includes people like them.

As a result, I no longer encourage students to pretend alternative families don't exist. Instead, we preface such activities by talking about the many forms of families and decide as a class not to tolerate stereotypes.

## Turning the Whole School Into Your Classroom

As a 10th-grader, Darling Cerna had little opportunity to share her Guatemalan heritage with other students until a Spanish teacher asked her to participate in an interview assigned as part of a class project.

"I thought it was a great idea," she says. "I love talking about my culture ... and it's nice to talk to someone about your differences now and then—something I barely get to do at school."

Her interview was part of a project for Spanish students at Princeton Day School, where I teach. Over the course of a week, the students prepared questions and recorded interviews in Spanish with native and heritage Spanish speakers

throughout the school. They included fellow students, faculty, administrators and staff, such as food-service workers. Students benefited from the chance to practice their language skills in an authentic setting, while the people they interviewed saw their language and culture elevated and valued.

Ninth-grader Jake Hall interviewed a science teacher of Mexican descent.

"This really piques your awareness about all of the students and faculty ... with a rich Hispanic heritage," he says, "and really brings to light the diversity of our community."

In addition to helping to break down stereotypes, reaching out to Spanish speakers helped create a greater sense of community at the school. Even after the project, food-service workers Lisette Rodas and Uli Chacon continue to chat in Spanish with their interviewers.

"It was flattering to be asked to participate," says Rodas. "It's nice that they see we're not just here to cook and serve." And for Chacon, who grew up in rural Costa Rica, it was interesting to teach the mostly urban students about life in the country. He also notes that students now call him by name.

"I felt good [talking to the kids]," he says. "It's a good thing to do—for both them and us." ♦